

Airman's curiosity about drugs earns eight months confinement

By Karen Fleming-Michael
Air University Public Affairs

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, Ala. (AFPN) — An airman's foray into drugs and the local club scene here earned her eight months of confinement time at a military detention facility in California, a bad conduct discharge, reduction to airman basic and total forfeitures of pay and allowances.

The 20-year-old airman, who agreed to be interviewed on condition of anonymity, shared her story so that others can learn from her mistakes.

Because she thought the drugs would be out of her system in three days, and because it was a weekend, and she believed there was only a slim chance of having a drug test on Monday, she said she took cocaine, methamphetamine and Ecstasy.

"I knew it was illegal, but I was curious. I had heard how meth makes you feel good, so I was like 'Wow, I want to try it.' It was just a party thing," she said. "I figured, 'Hey, I'm off base, at a club. I don't see any military people here. I'm not going to get caught.'"

What the airman did not know was that, while she was club hopping, getting high and helping her friends get Ecstasy pills during a "girls' night out," she was also observed distributing the drug.

After purchasing Ecstasy for two friends, she never stopped to think, "I'm distributing Ecstasy." Two days later, the pills she purchased ended up in an evidence box at the Office of Special Investigations.

On March 15 her commander read her the charges, one count each for use of cocaine, methamphetamine and Ecstasy and two counts of distribution of Ecstasy.

"The crimes were severe because there were three hard drugs used and the crimes were made worse by the distribution. She didn't just use it herself; she connected drugs with people," said Capt. Stephen See, trial

counsel for the 42nd Air Base Wing legal office.

She was unaware that she was suspected of using drugs because someone else under investigation by OSI listed the airman's name as someone who might have, See said.

This is a typical scenario when it comes to drug cases, he said.

"You find someone who uses and they dime out a friend," See said. "Even if they don't test and find the drugs in you, if they test someone else, that person usually ends up copping out friends. One way or the other, you're going to get caught. It's just about when and how.

"If we have a witness saying they saw you use, and we can determine that the substance you used was (Ecstasy), we're good to go," See said.

All the prosecutors need to make a case is a witness who can describe what the substance looked like and its effects, what they were told it was and whether a typical price was paid for it.

The airman pleaded guilty to the charges.

To help the Eastern Circuit judge understand how serious the airman's crimes were, the prosecution had an expert witness, Capt. Karen Berkeley, a 42nd Medical Group clinical pharmacist, testify at the sentencing hearing.

"Unless you understand what these drugs can do to people, how they can destroy lives, you can't make a good judgement on how it should be punished," See said.

Berkeley addressed the dangers of Ecstasy, methamphetamines and cocaine, including impaired judgement — so users present a risk to themselves and others — and behavior changes, which can make users violent. The drugs can also cause schizophrenia, disorders similar to it or brain damage.

"I knew any drug was not good at all, from marijuana

to cocaine to everything," she said. "Now the exact effects of them, I didn't know. I learned a lot in court (listening to the pharmacist's testimony)."

During the sentencing argument, Capt. Tammie McKinney, 42nd ABW legal office co-trial counsel, presented a series of reasons why drug abuse can't be tolerated.

"The case is a tragedy for the Air Force because she was a trusted member, and these are dangerous crimes," McKinney said. "This is not any old job. The accused was charged with protecting this country. We have to punish these crimes. They cannot be tolerated."

McKinney asked for a 12-month detention to ensure the airman, who is five months pregnant, could not expose her unborn son to drugs.

The judge sentenced the airman to eight months.

"Even after I was read my rights, I didn't realize how much trouble I was in. It didn't hit me until yesterday (at the sentencing hearing)," she said. "I knew I was going to go to confinement, but somewhere in my mind I thought, 'Maybe it just won't happen.'"

Immediately after sentencing, the airman was taken into custody and escorted to the holding facility here. Two days later, the airman was sent to the Naval Consolidated Brig Miramar, a medium security confinement facility in San Diego, Calif.

If she gives birth during confinement, within 24 hours of the delivery her mother, who is in Indiana, will have to pick up the newborn, or the baby will enter California's foster care system.

Uncertain about her future after confinement, she knows it will be hard to find the job that she will need to provide for her son.

One thing she is certain of is that she does not want anyone else to make the same mistake she did.

"Don't do it," she said. "Drugs may make you feel great for a while, but it's not worth it. If you get caught,

Tensions still high after 50 years in Korea

By Master Sgt. Louis A. Arana-Barradas
Air Force Print News

OSAN AIR BASE, Republic of Korea — Despite the on-again, off-again talks between North and South Korea, South Korea continues to live "under the gun," said the top Air Force commander in the country.

U.S. troops based in Korea still face a very real threat from the huge North Korean army that is ready and primed at the Demilitarized Zone, said Lt. Gen. Charles Heflebower, deputy commander of U.S. Forces Korea and 7th Air Force commander.

The North's capacity to attack the South negates any attempts the country is making diplomatically to reconcile with its neighbor, he said. But U.S. troops based in the South "understand that and take the threat seriously," Heflebower said. "It's a threat that in many ways has not changed since the Korean War armistice was signed almost 50 years ago."

Since then, however, North Korea's capability to make war — to attack with little or no warning — has gone through an evolutionary improvement, he said. Today, the North's army is the world's fifth largest, with 1.2 million troops. Most of those are along the DMZ.

President Bush ordered a review of policy toward North Korea in March. That prompted the North to resume its anti-American rhetoric and also threaten to go back to a policy of confrontation and tension toward the South.

"That makes our mission here real," Heflebower said. "We don't have to invent it."

There are 37,000 U.S. troops based in South Korea. They serve side-by-side with their South Korean counterparts. Together they create a ready and credible force that is well-trained, well-equipped and well-led, he said.

Over the years, the joint force has created an environment that tells the North a military option for reunification is not an option, Heflebower said. The force is a clear warning to the North that reconciliation or reunification will come only through political, economic or diplomatic means.

"The contribution (the troops) make to deterrence keeps the North's military option off the table," he said.

However, Heflebower said he hopes the Koreas will one day mend their relations, even reunite. Until then, the number of U.S. troops in South Korea would stay at the present level. He does not see that figure affected by concerns over the military's operations tempo. That is something the president has asked Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to check. Any decision on troop reduction in South Korea would be up to people in Washington, he said.

But, "If the two Koreas should reach a reconciliation, if the environment significantly changes here, then I think it's reasonable to expect we would look at troop levels," Heflebower said.

There has not been a change in that environment in 50 years. The only change has been in the North's intent to seek an accord with the South. But there has to be more than willingness on the North's part to talk about change, said Heflebower.

"We've not seen any reduction in their force," he said. "We've not seen what we call the confidence-building measures. Nor have we seen any inclination by the North to discuss those yet, or even put them on the table."

